INTERRELATION BETWEEN THE UNIVERSITY’S SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND SUSTAINABILITY

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Abstract

Since the 1990s the Russian universities have been under constant reformation – first in a strive to survive, then under the aegis of the Bologna process, later according to the American business model of ‘education services providers’, with a number of ‘big’ Russian universities having achieved some serious results and positions in global rankings and two thirds of the total number of Russian universities closed down or taken over by the Ministry’s favourites. Like many revolutionary reforms, the higher education reforms in the Russian Federation took little notice of people working for universities doomed to closure or merger, so today, when the Russian government speaks much about sustainability, the situation with two fundamentals of corporate sustainable development – corporate social responsibility and wellbeing, arouses my particular research interest.

The purpose of the research was to understand and describe the current state of implementation of CSR and wellbeing concepts at universities worldwide and Russian universities in particular and identify the factors hindering successful development of the concepts in the Russian higher education system.

The results of the study show that CSR and wellbeing concepts have been understood and implemented differently at different Russian universities due to a number of reasons identified within the research.

Based on the findings, recommendations were formulated aimed at facilitating the implementation of the University CSR and wellbeing concepts. The results can be applied to improve the situation with CSR and staff’s wellbeing both in Russian and other universities of the world.

Keywords: CSR, wellbeing, university level, human capital, Russian universities.

1 INTRODUCTION

Higher education as a socio-economic phenomenon continues to change rapidly in Europe and around the world. The large-scale structural reform of higher education in the first decade of the 21st century (the Bologna process), caused by the need to develop adequate responses to the large-scale challenges of the modern external environment – the increase of global competition, the aging of the European population and the impact of the financial and economic crisis, – has been realized in Europe, involving new stakeholders and new resources.

The purpose of corporate social responsibility or CSR is to guide organisations to act “in an ethical and transparent way that contributes to the health and welfare of society”, according to ISO business standards (ISO-26000 2014), which is realized and implemented by universities engaged in serving their communities, with the 363 universities from 77 countries – members of worldwide Talloires Network [1] setting a perfect example.

Today the concept of social corporate responsibility presumes organisations’ conducting their businesses in a way that is ethical, society friendly and beneficial to community [2], with CSR literacy becoming an imperative for various actors in an increasing number of governmental, business, and community sectors nationally and internationally [3] and playing a growing role for organisations’ sustainability and competitiveness in today’s world.

The concept of wellbeing refers to diverse and interconnected dimensions of physical, mental, and social wellness that extend beyond the traditional definition of health. It includes choices and activities aimed at achieving physical vitality, mental alacrity, social satisfaction, a sense of accomplishment, and personal fulfilment [4].
The CSR concept has been evolving in meaning and practice. It is obvious that the concepts of CSR and wellbeing are now very closely interconnected, particularly in the university – a specific kind of organisation, which prosperity particularly depends on the quality of its staff, which in its turn depends on the employees' wellbeing [5].

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2 METHODOLOGY

The study was carried out at three Russian universities differing in their status and location. The information was gathered from literature, newspapers, the Internet and by interviewing university academics and representatives of administration. Basing on the cases of three Russian Universities, the author analyzed integration of the CSR and wellbeing concepts in the practice of Russian universities. The universities were chosen according to two main principles – the principle of location: two of the universities are situated in Moscow and one is situated in a Russian province – in the town of Lipetsk; and the principle of size, status and functionality: one of the universities chosen for the research is the National Research University “Higher School of Economics”, which is one of the largest universities in the Russian Federation, multifunctional and having the special status of ‘national research university’; the second university though it is called Lipetsk State Pedagogical University, is also multifunctional, though smaller and having a lower status. Yet the third university – Moscow State Institute for Tourism Industry, is still smaller and of narrow specialization – it mainly prepares future employees for the tourism and hospitality industries of Moscow.

The data for the research were collected from the researched universities’ websites, through the author’s personal observation and sociological research.

The applied research methodology is based upon systemic approach and includes the qualitative method of semi-structured interview, which aims at identifying the level of integration of the CSR principles in the practice of the researched universities and concern of the universities' top management in their employees' wellbeing, with implementation of all its components – healthcare to preserve their physical vitality and mental alacrity, employees' personal and professional growth, and positive work atmosphere (environmental mastery) contributing to their positive relations with their colleagues.

3 CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AT THE UNIVERSITY

The principles of corporate social responsibility presuming sustainable value-creation for both communities' stakeholders and the communities where they operate, support universities’ strategic vision, assists universities’ decision making and, as it is correctly stated in the CSR statement of the University of London, reassures that universities’ activities are carried out ethically, sustainably and for the public benefit. It brings together a large number of policies and activities that could be brought under a Corporate Social Responsibility umbrella, demonstrating to the university’s stakeholders, customers and the general public the strong ethics and values within which the business operates, and reinforce the values upon which the university is developing [6].

3.1 CSR Concept Development

The concept of corporate social responsibility is deeply rooted in the Industrial Revolution of the late 1800s, yet its contemporary understanding is mostly a product of the 20th century – from the early 1950s to its present popularity, with the concept having grown from its focus on a limited number of stakeholders to a far reaching and inclusive scope of those involved and gradually evolving into global in the 21st century [7].

In the 1980s, the CSR concept started developing through the concepts of stakeholder management theory, business ethics, public policy, corporate social responsiveness, and corporate social performance, with the concept of corporate citizenship, competing with CSR in the 1990s and contributing to its development.
Carroll (1991) viewed companies’ obligations as a vertical hierarchy with economic obligations (making profit for the shareholders) as the basement of the pyramid; with legal (obeying the law) at the second tier; ethical (doing no harm) for the environment in the middle of the pyramid; and finally, philanthropic (making a contribution to society) crowning the pyramid. Caroll (1991) and his followers considered economic and legal responsibilities as mandatory; ethical responsibility – socially necessary; and philanthropic – as socially desirable. The researchers believed that companies failing to engage with the total scope of responsibilities risked the loss of legitimacy, resulting in poor commercial outcomes [8].

By the 2000s, the focus on theory development of the CSR concept had given way to empirical research and development of the concept along with related concepts of business ethics, corporate citizenship, and sustainability. The mix of conceptual and empirical research provided sufficient ground for further development of the CSR concept basing on systemic approach.

Today the CSR concept has evolved through its practices to having both an ethical component and a business one. In the contemporary world characterised with intense global competition, it is evident that any organisation, including the university can be sustainable only basing on an integral CSR system [9] as long as the CSR system continues to add value to the success of the organisation. Besides, the role of the local community and society at large should not be underestimated as universities’ success largely depends on them. The pressures of global competition keep intensifying and solid and effective CSR systems contribute to the competitiveness of universities that try hard to pursue opportunities, manage risks while taking the social impact of their operations into account.

### 3.2 The University’s CSR System

Corporate social responsibility that has been in focus of leading enterprises for several decades now, has grasped the attention of university top-managers striving for achieving their organisations’ sustainability.

Unlike business enterprises aimed at satisfying the needs of their customers at the highest level possible, universities’ core goals primarily include educating and research, which on the one hand makes the task of serving the society and local community easier but on the other, in case of big universities makes it more difficult, distracting their attention from their local communities often responsible for their funding.

To turn a university into a socially responsible institution sounds reasonable for many universities’ leaders and they integrate CSR into the framework of higher education and their universities’ strategies. We share the idea of the University of the West of Scotland that universities “cannot be sustainable without being socially responsible” [10], as sustainability comprises three components – economic, environmental and social aiming at achieving profits, taking care of the planet and people [11].

Besides defining their approaches to CSR and including the notion of social responsibility into their strategies, leading universities do their best to encourage community engagement and maximise their impact on the national societies, developing partnerships with local and international organisations [12].

Thus, the University of the West of Scotland works with a number of local primary and secondary schools trying to explain the benefits of higher education to the children whose parents do not prioritise higher education as beneficial for their future careers, and develops partnerships with local businesses and even hospices [ibid.] to increase their contribution to the local society’s sustainability.

This goal of the British university (as well as most universities in Europe and beyond) to educate a majority of citizens thus preparing them for the innovative future contradicts the current strategies of most Russian universities forced to comply with the national policies of education including the policy of higher education elaborated by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation [13].

Nanyang Technological University in Singapore aims at serving the community providing its members with opportunities, networks and partnerships, inspiring the young to cooperate for the benefits of their community and society and finally, make positive changes as a generation both nationally and globally [14]. This strategy is highly appreciative as it targets the whole nation and its sustainability both at the local and global levels.
According to Olga Golodets, Assistant to the Chairman of the Government, 65% of the Russians do not need higher education [15]. And this is said about the nation, which has been leading Europe in innovations for several centuries and according to the OECD’s study of 2012, has been recently the most highly educated country in the world (54% of university graduates), followed by the US, Great Britain, Australia, Germany, and France [16], the country having a limited number and volume of production industries and developing an economy of service type.

The University of Leicester has developed a five-point action-plan called PROUD (by the first letters of the first words of its core areas) focusing on “promoting health and wellbeing, restoring the environment, opening access to culture and heritage, upskilling for the 21st century, and developing children and young people” [12]. As is seen, promotion of health and wellbeing is a priority for Leicester, closely connected and developed with care for the environment, educating its members culturally, developing their skills and formatting new skills for the requirements of the digital era and taking care for the new generations. All the five items of the PROUD action plan are based upon universities’ core functions – teaching and research aimed at educating and developing both their external and internal environments.

3.3 Recent Changes in CSR at Russian Universities

According to Barkemeyer (2009), studying the CSR aspect of the UN Global Compact, non-Western companies’ attitude to CSR, particularly in transition countries, is quite limited, with the general understanding in the countries where tax evasion, corruption and fraud are commonplace [17], that a responsible company is a simply company complying with the law and codes of conduct [18].

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation was declared to be building a market-based economy but in reality in the 1990s businesses were “operating in an institutional vacuum” [19], with the weak state trying to build a kind of “chaotic capitalism” and providing ground for widely spreading corruption, non-payment of taxes, and organized crime [20]. All these did not provide proper basis for CSR development in the country.

We agree with Halme et al. (2009) that national, cultural, legal, and institutional contexts need to be taken into account, otherwise the understanding of CSR (including its types, scopes and nature) in non-Western countries may easily go wrong or get lost [21]. Thus, Zueva-Owens & Fairbrass (2010) come to the conclusion that the civil society in Russia has no influence on CSR practices in Russia [22]; Kuznetsov, Kuznetsova & Warren (2009) conclude that Russian managers do not take CSR seriously as companies’ legitimate activity [23], while Preuss & Barkemeyer (2011) basing on company reports state that a high enough ratio of big Russian companies include CSR information in their external reports (often in English only) [24].

4 EMPLOYEES’ WELL-BEING AT THE UNIVERSITY

Wellbeing is a positive outcome of both public and personal efforts aimed at creating a society that mutually benefits from its members allowing them to benefit from it. This positive outcome is deeply meaningful for people and for many sectors of society [25].

The main and primary components of wellbeing include good living conditions (housing, employment), which sufficient quality provision is important for public policy. Besides, such difficult to measure aspects of wellbeing as the quality of their relationships, their positive emotions, realization of their potential, and their overall satisfaction with life are also integral and vitally important components of both personal and national wellbeing [26].

Paid employment is critical to individuals’ wellbeing as it provides them with direct access to resources. As regards to academics and university researchers, in many cases paid employment fosters the meaning and purpose of their life and its satisfaction [27], as people choose the professions of academics and university researchers aim at creating a maximum amount of social good and social use [28]. With their daily work, they do not only form and develop certain competencies of certain students and younger researchers; they create and shape the future of their nation and the sustainability of their country.

That is why university employees’ wellbeing (particularly that of academics and researchers) and university administrations’ general attitude to its provision seen as part of university CSR should be of particular importance for national and local governments and university top-managers.
4.1 The Concept of Well-Being

The concept of well-being consists of three major components – standard of living, level of living and quality of life, with the standard of living comprising the level of education, employment status, food, dress, house, amusements and comforts of modern living; with the level of living consisting of health, food consumption, education, occupation and working conditions, housing, social security, clothing, recreation and leisure and human rights; and the quality of life including good health, happiness, education, social and intellectual attainment, freedom of action, justice and freedom of expression [29].

The governments of many countries are trying to improve the quality of their people’s life by decreasing morbidity and mortality, building an effective system of primary health care and supporting the nation’s physical, mental and social wellbeing [ibid.].

As a framework for measuring well-being, Kahneman et al. (2006) proposed five conceptual levels (from molar to molecular), including objective well-being, i.e. external conditions (income, neighborhood, housing, etc.), subjective well-being (satisfaction / dissatisfaction), persistent mood level (optimism / pessimism, confidence in the future), immediate pleases / pains and transient emotional states (joy, anger, etc.), and biochemical, neural bases of behaviour [30]. We believe that the first three tiers of this framework can be used to estimate academics’ and university researchers’ well-being as an integral result and priority of university administrators’ efforts.

4.2 University Staff’s Well-Being

The European Union paying much attention to the concept of wellbeing and its implementation, so it has generated quite a number of its definitions, but one used by the European Working Conditions Observatory seems to be of particular relevance as it incorporates productivity, i.e. is based upon cause–consequence relationship: ‘Well-being at work means safe, healthy and productive work in a well-led organisation by competent workers and work communities who see their job as meaningful and rewarding, and see work as a factor that supports their life management’ [31].

Wellbeing at work is a complex phenomenon depending on physical, emotional and social factors, both inside and outside the workplace. It comprises many vital components (e.g. occupational health, occupational safety, and involves many different occupations such as human resource (HR) services, health services, line management, senior management, trade unions and labour inspectors), with each of them having various motivation for improving and promoting wellbeing at work [32].

According to the not so recent trend focusing on the student as the subject of paramount importance at the university, Arthaud-Day et al. (2005) researched dependence of student’s performance on their life satisfaction [33]. And although the assumption that a happy person makes a more productive student and employee, empirical proof of this assumption concerning students are sparse but empirical tests of this assumption concerning academics and university researchers are practically absent.

A growing number of US companies have been shifting focus from general employee wellness programs to more comprehensive health and productivity programmes dealing with subtler issues such as the workforce’s emotional and mental health, social connectivity, financial education, sense of fulfillment on the job, and other equally complicated and equally important aspects [32]. Workplace health and well-being programmes do not only have a positive impact on employees’ wellness, they often lead to a significant increase in the team’s engagement, cohesiveness and overall productivity. Research shows that a healthy and happy workforce is likely to reduce costs by more than $1,600 per employee, with a decreased number of leave days, which could otherwise be caused by unplanned sickness or even disability [31].

4.3 Tools Used to Raise University Staff’s Well-Being

In the high-speed world of today overwhelmed with often redundant information and requiring very intense hours a day, wellbeing in general and mental health in particular are considered in the United Kingdom to be components of university internal environment of primary importance, which made several British universities and non-governmental organisations unite their efforts to develop the universities’ individual institutional mental health strategies and co-created mental health strategies by joint efforts of the staff and students by the initiative of the non-governmental organisation Universities UK. This initiative promoted a proactive programme of work on mental health in higher education,
aimed at ensuring wellbeing and mental health at the given universities, considered to be a strategic priority and requiring a whole university approach to both issues.

The authors agree with Okhai (2017) stating that staff wellbeing matters at least as much as students’ in university communities, and it should really be noted that university staff are much more exposed to workplace pressures – burnout, stress, long hours and isolation, with student, colleagues and university administrators increasingly demanding their answers to every possible question and solutions to every problem. That is why the university internal environment should be created while keeping in mind team working, social connection at work, belonging at work and mindfullness [34].

Buffet et al. (2013) believe that wellbeing at work is based upon a positive work environment, which development should be based on a strategic approach, a vision, a whole-institution approach, and a framework based on the vision. Universities as multifunctional organisations, more complicated than many businesses should only develop basing upon an integral strategy, with their internal environment to be created and sustained upon a strategic whole organisation and whole nation / population approach [35].

5 REALISATION OF THE TWO CONCEPTS AT RUSSIAN UNIVERSITIES

The current Russian policy of the higher education development aims at copying the superficial characteristics of the US system of higher education including its blunders and failures [36] – such as undermining academics’ authority on the one hand, by forcing quite a number of academics to work in parallel for two or even more employers in strive for higher payment and consequently, better living conditions, and on the other – making them dependent on students’ estimations and ratings, which in many cases makes academics to fight for students’ appreciation using higher (though not always deserved) grades thus turning responsible teachers into easy graders for higher salaries’ sake; students’ (and their parents’) obsession with vocationalism turning students away from liberal education encouraging to develop a broad range of intellectual interests, values, and skills for the sake of instantly saleable skills based on narrow specializations [37]. As to the quality of higher education, it has got blurred as grade-point averages have almost lost their meaning, with a majority of senior students graduating with honors, not always being able to prove their profound competence in the chosen profession [ibid.].

5.1 Important Factors and Variables

The most important variable and factor stimulating academics’ and university researchers’ wellbeing is their employers’ appreciation, which has been researched as a pilot survey based on a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview with a number of academics, researchers and managers in the three examined higher schools – 16 from HSE University, 18 from Lipetsk State Pedagogical University and 12 from Moscow (Senkevich) State Institute Tourism Industry.

The responses did not diversify much from university to university and composed more or less uniform clusters of attitudes, with very few bluntly negative attitudes of academics to the lack of appreciation received from top and linear managers of their universities.

The second important variable and factor stimulating or deteriorating the creation of proper working conditions is the quality of university internal environment. Quality of university internal environment seems to be a component of primary importance to 78% of the academics, 59% of the university researchers and 34% of the mid-level and low-level linear managers.

5.2 The Case of HSE University

The National Research University “Higher School of Economics” or HSE University being among the largest, most affluent and most innovative institutions of higher education in Russia, has a well-written strategy and a profound vision. However, neither of them reflects the university top managers’ attitudes to CSR and staff wellbeing as its integral part [38].

HSE University has been developing an internal system of wellness but it mainly focused on supporting financially academics eager to combine their teaching responsibilities with researching and innovative activities (such as elaborating new programmes and courses in foreign languages).

Nevertheless, unlike in the other two higher schools, HSE researchers have an understanding of CSR and wellbeing, though this understanding is rather one-sided and outdated. Thus, they traditionally
(within the student-oriented approach) believe that the concept of wellbeing mainly or uniquely concerns students, not academics and devote their researches and article to HSE students’ wellbeing and their perception of HSE University’s internal environment and their own place in it. This approach results in students’ egocentric perception of themselves revealing a weak CSR system at HSE University: in response to the question who is responsible for citizens’ wellbeing, 44% believed that it was the state, 35% supposed that logically citizens themselves were responsible for their own wellbeing and still 77% of the respondents were waiting for some particular support from the state to the young generation and they truly believed that aid to talented youth was obligatory for the state.

5.3 The Case of LSPU

Lipetsk State Pedagogical University does not have a CSR system nor a comprehensive staff’s wellbeing system, though its top managers try to use certain incentives aimed at stimulating academics and researchers to work more effectively combining the two kinds of occupation. LSPU top managers’ understanding of their responsibility before their students and their parents as ‘customers’ of their educational services does not extend to their responsibility before their staff [39].

As to the staff’s wellbeing and that of students and other stakeholders, LSPU hasn’t created a system of wellbeing so far but hopefully, it has a remarkable potential.

5.4 The Case of MSITI

Moscow (Senkevich) State Institute for Tourism Industry has proven to practice the worst attitude and exercised the lowest level of CSR, and employees’ wellbeing as its most evident and highly important component [40]. Despite a great number of tools and methods developed and used worldwide that can help employees feel appreciated, the current administration of this higher school does not seem to have explored The Five Languages of Appreciation in the Workplace by Chapman and While [41] or any other CSR bible.

MSITI top managers seem to be more preoccupied with economic aspects of their own wellbeing at the expense of academics and researchers, which undoubtedly results in the overall system deterioration and students’ wellbeing gradual failure, too.

6 CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The research has highlighted a scope of challenges – economic, social, political, legal (legislative) and organisational – facing the development of corporate social responsibility at Russian universities. Thus, today politically, legally and economically Russian universities are forced to create and develop employment systems contradicting the very core of CSR concept and that of wellbeing.

Challenge 1 – political. It embraces a scope of political limitations, including those integrated into strategies, tactics and decisions concerning the current attitudes and future development of university CSR systems and university employees’ wellbeing, often not viewed as an integral part of universities’ (and their top managers’) primary responsibility.

Challenge 2 – legal (including legislative). The organisation’s responsibility for its employees and employers’ accountability before his employees have gradually lost their legal basis, turning employees, including academics and university researchers into hired workers constantly working on the basis of temporary contracts and thus deprived of the rights constituting the very core of their wellbeing.

Challenge 3 – economic. Basing on the misbalanced and unstable economic situation in the country, most Russian universities’ top managers often (though not always) themselves trapped in Procrustean bed of Russian governmental authorities’ economic guidelines, keep academics’ salaries at a comparatively low level, simultaneously increasing their workload and elevating the stress level by constantly persuading them that they can be easily substituted by their jobless colleagues queuing outside.

Challenge 4 – social. The overall atmosphere of social insecurity aggravated with academics’ and researchers’ exposure to their employment rights violation, high level of distrust on the part of university administrators, students’ parents and often students, with very weak trade unions, decreases academics’ and researchers’ life and job satisfaction, weakens them physically and mentally and shatters the remaining components of their wellbeing.
Challenge 5 – organizational. In some Russian higher schools (at least in MSITI for sure) instead of building a mutually supportive team of academics, top managers exercise the Ancient Roman rule “Divide and rule” separating their employees to increase their sense of insecurity, which allows manipulating them without much additional effort.

On identifying the most significant challenges and basing on a thorough analysis of the examined Russian higher schools’ websites, policies (not always written though), and observed practices, the authors have selected three priority issues seen as primary measures to be taken to improve the state of affairs with CSR at the Russian universities and their employees’ wellbeing.

Priority issue 1: The need for a comprehensive review of the currently implemented institutional policies substituting the CSR and wellbeing systems at the higher schools in question.

Priority issue 2: The need for changes in legal and legislative basis for CSR in Russia.

Priority issue 3: The need for political changes in the governmental attitudes at every level of governance – national, regional and local, constituting a proper framework for every Russian organization’s activity (both commercial and budget funded) including that of Russian higher schools making a great impact to Russia’s present and future.

Basing on the research questions and research results, the following answers can be given:

1. The concepts of CSR and wellbeing increasingly intertwine in Western universities, with the depth depending on the national policy and national attitude to CSR and citizens’ wellbeing in particular, with British, German and Swiss universities heading the tendency.

2. The specific challenges to successful integration of the CSR and wellbeing concepts in Russian universities’ theory (not to mention practice) include the whole scope of challenges basing on political, legal (or, rather legislative), economic, social and organizational as the Russian legislation reflects the absence of political responsibility before the nation, which deforms the national economy and social life primarily at the organisational level and all the others basing on it.

3. It is too early to speak about systems of CSR and wellbeing per se at the Russian universities in question as not every Russian university’s top management has a correct understanding of CSR, its integral components including employees’ wellbeing and their importance for academics and university researchers’ effectiveness and efficiency. Basing on our research, we conclude that the top managers of the HSE University have a good understanding of the importance of CSR and wellbeing systems integration and development but in practice the implementation of these concepts turns out to be limited for the sake of other seemingly more important institutional, regional and national policies, most of which seem to contradict the creating of CSR and wellbeing systems at every level of the Russian society including institutional level represented among others by institutions of higher education. As to the other two higher schools examined, judging on their common practices, LSPU top managers seem to have at least some understanding of social responsibility before the internal and external environment as a fundamental for the University’s sustainability, while the current top managers of MSITI do not understand their responsibility before the institutional, local and national society at all and cannot see any connection between the academics wellbeing and the learning outcomes, with quality decreasing really fast.

The only way out for MSITI is a complete change of the entire top management and its substitution with adequate leaders (or at least managers) understanding that academics constitute the core of every higher school and in their absence or with a low level of their wellbeing, academics, i.e. the key value makers (including profit from students paying tuition fee) soon lose sense in working for incompetent top managers, not to mention high quality hard work (as increasing quality level always presumes additional effort). Recommendations for LSPU and HSE University include correct targeting and priority setting based on the universities’ pursue of long-term strategic goals and not short-term conformity with fashionable political trends.
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